

Documents Reveal U.S. Effort In '54 to Delay Viet Election

First of a Series

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The Eisenhower administration, fearful that elections throughout North and South Vietnam would bring victory to Ho Chi Minh, fought hard but in vain at the 1954 Geneva Conference to reduce the possibility that the conference would call for such elections.

But the following year it was South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, far more than the American government, who was responsible for the elections not taking place. Diem flatly refused even to discuss the elections with the Communist regime in Hanoi.

These are among the facts emerging from sections of the Pentagon study on the origins of the Vietnam war, made available to The Washington Post.

The chief architect of the American policy of opposition to elections, as was well known at the time, was President Eisenhower's Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. But it was Eisenhower who had insisted on allied support if he were to ask Congress for authority to use American military force to save the French army in Indochina in early 1954. The United States did not get that allied support.

The origin of the idea of holding an election in divided Vietnam, called for in the Geneva accords of 1954, remains obscure. But there is nothing obscure about Dulles' attitude.

In July of 1954, he sent a cable to various American diplomats then struggling with the problem. It said in part:

"... Thus since undoubtedly true that elections

might eventually mean unification Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh this makes it all more important they should be only held as long after cease-fire agreement as possible and in conditions free from intimidation to give democratic elements best chance. We believe important that no date should be set now and especially that no conditions should be accepted by French which would have direct or indirect effect of preventing effective international supervision of agreement ensuring political as well as military guarantees."

Dulles went on to call attention to a joint statement by President Eisenhower and British Prime Minister Churchill in June, especially that part which spoke of achieving "unity through free elections supervised by the UN."

Later in July, shortly before issuance in Geneva of the "final declaration" of the long conference, a declaration that included the statement that "general elections shall be held in July 1956," Dulles cabled his unhappiness at the impending outcome.

He sent Walter Bedell Smith, the Under Secretary of State who had returned to the Geneva Conference to limit as much as possible what Dulles foresaw as the disastrous outcome, a cable that said in part:

"While we don't want to take responsibility of imposing our views on the French, I feel particularly concerned about provisions of paragraph 6 which gives the Control Commission constituted as per SECTO 666 authority also to control the general elections. The ink is hardly dry on the Declaration of President Eisenhower

and Prime Minister Churchill of June 29 to the effect that 'In the case of nations now divided against their will, we shall continue to seek to achieve unity through free elections supervised by the UN to insure that they are conducted fairly.' It is rather humiliating to see that Declaration now so quickly go down the drain with our apparent acquiescence."

About a week before the above cable, and after French Premier Pierre Mendes-France had asked that Dulles return to Geneva and before Dulles agreed to send Smith as his stand-in, Dulles cabled some of his unhappiness to Mendes-France via the American Embassy in Paris.

Dulles complained to Mendes-France of "a whittling-away process, each stroke of which may in itself seem unessential, but which cumulatively could produce a result quite different from that envisaged" in a seven-point minimum program, agreed upon by Britain and the United States, that he then was trying to sell France.

He included this paragraph as illustrative of that "whittling away process."

"Allowing Communist forces to remain in Northern Laos; accepting a Vietnam line of military demarcation considerable south of Donghoi; neutralizing and [one word indistinct] demilitarizing Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam so as to impair their capacity to maintain stable, noncommunist regimes; accepting elections so early and so ill-prepared and ill-supervised as to risk the loss of the entire area to Communism; accepting international supervision by a body which cannot be effective because it includes a Communist state which has veto power."

In the end the election was called for, but not without considerable argument at Geneva, where the United States worked through the French. But others had the important say.

Chief among these important people were Chou En-lai, then as now Chinese Premier, and V. M. Molotov, the Soviet Union's redoubtable foreign minister.

In June of 1954, American Ambassador to France Douglas Dillon cabled Dulles to report conversations with Jean Chauvel, a key diplomat at the conference. Chauvel reported that Chou had "said that he recognized that there were now two governments in the territory of Vietnam, the Viet Minh Government and the Vietnamese Government. According to Chauvel, this was the first time that Chou had recognized the valid existence of the Vietnamese Government."

As to elections, Dillon reported:

"Regarding the final political settlement, Chou said this should be reached by direct negotiations between the two governments in Vietnam... Mendes at this point said that since the war had been going on for 8 years and passions were high, it would take a long time before elections could be held as the people must be given a full opportunity to cool off and calm down. Chou made no objection to this statement by Mendes and did not press for early elections."

On June 19, Smith called on Molotov at his Geneva villa. He filed a long report, with his comment, which included this:

"In private conversations with Mr. Eden and others, Communist delegates, in particular Chou En-lai, had taken an apparently reason-